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AUTHOR Spring, Joel
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ABSTRACT

Organized labor in the United States has been divided in the types of economic solutions it has sought for the working class and in the type of support it has given education. In terms of education, rightwing unionism has tended to accept the basic structure of American education and the general ideology of equality of opportunity. Leftwing unionism, on the other hand, has assumed that public schooling would not benefit the working class until economic relationships in society have changed, or have sought to create alternative schools for the children of the working class. (Author)

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Unionism and American Education

Joel Spring
Associate Professor of Education
Case Western Reserve University

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There has existed a tension in the American labor movement over the question of whether relief for the working classes in the United States should be sought through basic changes in the social and economic structure of society or through a trade union movement which accepted basic social and economic arrangements and sought improvement through the strike and collective bargaining. This tension can be traced to the nineteent' century when Terence Powderly, Grand Master Workman of the Knights of Labor, argued that the hope of the American workingman was in the formation of a collective commonwealth based on cooperative enterprises and not in the use of the strike and collective bargaining. Many trade union members of the Knights of Labor were strongly opposed to this policy and wanted a more practical approach in the form of improved wages and working conditions. The trade union approach provided the backbone for the organization of the more economically and politically conservative American Federation of Labor in 1886. The formation of the AFL did not mean the end of the tension between broad social and economic goals and the narrower goals of improved wages and working conditions. This tension persisted within the AFL and other labor organizations in the twentieth century.[1]

Differences between trade unionists and exponents of more basic social changes were eventually reflected in attitudes toward public schooling. Organized labor in the nineteenth and twentieth century tended to share a common concern about corporate and business domination of the schools. Differences in extent of concern appeared in the twentieth century when more radical labor leaders saw little hope in the existing control of schooling and sought to establish a separate

system of schooling for children and members of the laboring force.

The tension between the trade unionist approach and the more radical social reconstructionist approach had important implications for the development of teachers' unions in the United States. If the major emphasis of teachers' unions became the trade unionist goals of collective bargaining and improvement of working conditions, this would mean dependence on the continuation of the existing structure of public schooling in the United States. Once a teachers' union had established a contractual agreement with a public school system which exerted monopolistic contr[illegible]r education, that teachers' union would tend to view a threat to the public school structure as a threat to its own existence. In this sense the trade union goals of teachers' unions had the potential of creating a very conservative force in American education.

To understand the conflict between trade union and social reconstructionist goals and how they were reflected in attitudes toward public schooling it is useful to look at the period from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. This was a crucial period for the development of the American Labor movement and the formation of public schooling.[2] It was in the Knights of Labor in the nineteenth century that there was a beginning of protest against corporate and business domination of the schools. The major target were the colleges and universities which were believed to be bastions of a conservative political and economic philosophy. Because of the apparent anti-labor attitudes of American colleges and universities the Knights of Labor felt they must develop other means for providing education for the worker.

Alternatives were sought in the attempt to establish government libraries attached to post offices and the establishment of one library lecture hall in each county in the United States.[3]

The Knights of Labor linked their concern about the social reconstruction of the social system with a provision for providing their own system of workers education. In the twentieth century this same sentiment led to the founding of the Workers Education Bureau and the Brookwood Labor College in the 1920's. Socialist labor leader James H. Maurer was President of both the Workers Education Bureau and the Brookwood Labor College. In 1922 in an article titled "Labor's Demand for Its Own Schools" he wrote, "All will agree that labor needs more education, but some will naively ask: 'Why must it establish schools of its own? Why can it not use the present educational institutions?'" Maurer stated that the suggestion of a college or university reminded the active unionist of the persecution of college professors for showing too much interest in the welfare of the masses and the college students used as strike breakers. "The workingmen's children," Maurer wrote, "return from school with accounts of indictments of the labor movements made by their teachers or by propagandists who have been allowed to address the pupils." Maurer reported hundreds of cases from around the country of teachers and professors being intimidated for pro-labor attitudes. Children within the schools, he claimed, "have been led to feel that their own fathers, an active unionists, have been made the dupes of treasonable conspirators. And they have been told that the open-shop campaign is a great patriotic movement to save America from bolshevism."[4]

In contrast to James Maurer the leadership of the AFL recognized

the problem of business domination of the schools but did not seek a resolution of the problem through the re-structuring of the educational system. Following World War I there was extensive concern about the schools becoming instruments for the teaching of a conservative ideology. What brought the issue to the forefront was the use of propaganda in the schools during the war. Under the section titled, "Control of Thought," of the report of the American Federation of Labor's Education Committee at their 1921 convention it was warned that the "exceedingly powerful" were trying to make a reality of the boast of a business leader who said, "The war taught us the power of propaganda. Now when we have anything to sell to the American people, we know how to sell it. We have the school, the pulpit and the press."[5] One of the major concerns of the Education Committee of the American Federation of Labor during this period was the gaining of academic freedom for school teachers through tenure laws and unionization. As Upton Sinclair reported, the 1920's became a vast graveyard for radical teachers.

One of the manifestations of the concern about anti-labor ideology in the schools was the establishment by the American Federation of Labor in 1919 of a special committee to investigate the content of social studies textbooks used in the public schools. This committee represented the conviction that organized labor had to begin to organize its own agency for influencing the content and curriculum of the public schools. The Committee reported at the 1922 convention of the American Federation of Labor that they found the major problem was not that textbooks gave an illiberal treatment of important social subjects but that "half of the texts in history and civics ignore the labor movement and the sub-

jects of particular interest to labor." The remedy sought by the Committee was to persuade publishers to include more material of labor in textbooks and continued surveillance of the books used in schools.[6]

One of the other concerns about business domination of the schools expressed by the leadership of the AFL was that current trends in vocational education, guidance, intelligence testing and tracking would lead to a denial of equality of opportunity and increased social stratification. The rise of vocational education before and after World War I led to a great fear that educational opportunity would be limited and working class children would be channeled into a proletarian class. The Executive Committee report presented at the 1915 convention of the American Federation of Labor claimed its support of an industrial education which would make the individual master of himself and his environment. The report also warned that vocational education might become a menace "through its perversion and through its manipulation to suit special interests and the ideals of old exploiters..." The report stated, "The people must watch carefully that school management and school control do not permit the building up of barriers that shall make for separation into classes or the establishment of any set of customs that shall make invidious distinctions between types of education."[7]

This fear that changes in education might become tools of the business interests also led leaders of the American Federation of Labor to cast a suspicious eye on educational changes related to the development of vocational education. In the 1920's the Education Committee of the American Federation of Labor conducted an investigation on the use of group intelligence tests. To a certain extent their concern reflected that of

the Knights of Labor in the nineteenth century who opposed the development of civil service examinations on the grounds that they would discriminate against those who did not have the leisure for an academic education. The Journal of the Knights of Labor had claimed, "Just as the educational test in the South is admittedly class legislation, so is the educational test for civil service; the latter is aimed at mechanics."[8] The investigation of the Education Committee in the 1920's achieved only an inclusive statement that the intelligence test "is as yet so completely in the experimental stage that no judgment can as yet be formed as to its educational value."[9] Investigation into the junior high school as means of differentiating students resulted in the same type of inconclusive action.[10]

The fears manifested by the leadership of the American Federation of Labor never resulted in any decisive action with regard to the restructuring of the system. Their approach was simply to accept the system and attempt to work within its framework. One of the goals of the Education Committee had been the establishment of education committees among local labor organizations to act as pressure groups. In 1930 the Education Committee found itself unable to meet because union funds were being concentrated on union organization. The Committee optimistically felt that its work would be carried on at the local level.[11]

In contrast to the approach of the leadership of the AFL toward educational change were the activities of the Brookwood Labor College, the Workers Education Bureau and the Manumit School for workers' children. As mentioned previously the Brookwood Labor College and the Workers Education Bureau were founded to provide workers with an education that

was not available in existing educational systems. The curriculum offered by Brookwood during the 1920's included courses in American Labor History, Current Events, Psychology, Economics, Social Literature and Labor Strategy. What is important to realize about Brookwood was that it offered a type of worker's education which was not, as it was in later years, geared mainly towards problems of union organization and management. The purpose of Brookwood was to provide a basic education which would lead to major social and economic changes in the structure of American society. Brookwood accepted both the limited trade union goals and the broader goals of social reconstruction. The Bulletin and Announcement of Courses of Brookwood in 1929 stated in its opening section on purpose, "Brookwood thinks of the labor movement both as a practical instrument by which workers achieve higher wages, shorter hours, and better conditions of work, and as a great social force having as its ultimate goal the good life for all men in a social order free from exploitation and based upon control by the workers."[12]

In 1924 the Vice President and Chairman of Brookwood Labor College A.J. Muste participated in the founding of the Manumit School for workers' children and became its first Chairman. The Manumit School, like Brookwood, was established to provide a type of education that was unavailable within existing educational systems. Manumit was established as a boarding school for children of workers between the ages of 9 and 14. A writer for the Nation who attended the founding meeting of Manumit wrote, "What Manumit stands for, in its relation to labor, is the free, untrammeled inquiry of the child's mind, when he displays a readiness for it, into the basic functions, problems, and ideals of the toilers, which in the public schools are deliberately withheld from his intellectual

and emotional experience."

The Workers' Education Bureau, Brookwood Labor College and Manumit were all established within a climate of belief that the existing educational system could not provide the working class with an education that would increase its social power and effectiveness. The curriculum of these organizations was directed toward trade unionism and social reconstruction. The leadership of the American Federation of Labor could accept the trade unionism aspect of the education but not the social reconstructionist aspect. In 1923 Samual Gompers recommended the activities of the Workers Education Bureau to the labor movement. After Gompers' death and the acceptance by William Green of the Presidency of the American Federation of Labor it became clear that the leadership of the American Federation of Labor wanted workers' education to be directed toward the needs of trade unionism.

In 1925 William Green addressed the Philadelphia Convention of the Workers' Education Bureau on the topic, "Education and Industrial Peace." Green argued in this speech that the backbone of the labor movement and the cause of industrial peace and stability was the trade union objective of collective bargaining. He gave three important reasons for labor's support of education. These reasons did not include any mention of using education for purposes of making any basic changes in social and economic structure of society. One objective was to prepare the child for society i.. the public schools and adults for the work of organized labor in adult education classes. This objective gave support to the idea of continuing to work within the existing framework of public education. A second objective of education was to train the union leader in techniques of collective bargaining and union management. This objective was fulfilled

when by the 1930's the Workers' Education Bureau was brought under the umbrella of the American Federation of Labor and its primary emphasis became that of training for union management. The third objective that Green saw for education was the dissemination of information about organized labor which would show the general public that organized labor was not associated with any radical economic or social theory. Green told the convention that, "We are confident that much of the hostility directed toward organized labor can be overcome through proper understanding of the high and patriotic purposes which organized labor enuniciates and champions."[14]

The President of the American Federation of Labor not only did not include social reconstruction in his educational philosophy but he also believed that organized labor should disassociate itself from any philosophy of this nature. In 1929 President Green issued a booklet attacking the Brookwood Labor College for promoting dual unionism and teaching a radical social philosophy. Green charged that two of the instructors "were so sympathetic toward Communism and the Communistic philosophy as to raise a doubt regarding their fitness and qualifications to present to students fairly and accurately the principles, policies and philosophy of the Labor movement in our own Country, as represented by the American Federation of Labor." Brookwood, of course, rejected these charges and claimed that it had given continuous support to the efforts and activities of the American Federation of Labor.[15]

The dispute between President Green and Brookwood reflected the internal tension that existed within the union movement between trade unionism and the broader social concerns of industrial unionism. These

differences would come to the forefront in the 1930's with the break with the American Federation of Labor by the Committee on Industrial Organizations. It should be mentioned that some of the early members of the C.I.O. attended Brookwood Labor College.[16]

The tension between these two labor philosophies was felt within the American Federation of Teachers. On the one hand there was an emphasis on collective bargaining in terms of improving the wages and conditions of employment. On the other hand was an emphasis on using the union as a means of reconstructing the educational system and as a means of combatting the conservative ideology in control of the schools. In 1914 the American Federation of Labor issued a resolution exhorting its members to return home to organize teachers. The main reasons given for organizing were that teachers were "overworked and underpaid" and that unionization was a "means of bettering their condition."[17]

When the American Federation of Teachers made its first appearance at the 1916 convention of the American Federation of Labor, the issue of educational reconstruction was brought to the forefront. The delegate representing the American Federation of Teachers warned the AFL "The forces of privilege and reaction are seizing this opportunity to entrench more firmly their domination of the schools of the country... Hence there has developed a vicious, country-wide attempt to abridge the freedom of the teacher..." The American Federation of Teachers then presented a resolution for support of their program of attack upon the entrenched interests in control of the schools. This resolution was unanimously adopted.[18]

The goals presented by the American Federation of Teachers in 1916 reflected issues that would plague it in later years. The primary assumption of the American Federation of Teachers at this time was that education could be removed from control of the business interests if teachers through unionization gained control of education. This meant removing control of teachers from lay boards of education. It was assumed that by undercutting the power of boards of education over teachers the door could slowly be closed on business domination of the schools. Ironically it also meant that the school administration would be given more power. The resolution in 1916 stated, "The control of the teaching staff should be removed from the lay Board of Education, and placed in the hands of the professional expert, the Superintendent of Schools." This goal was qualified by another which called for more democratic administration of the schools and the insuring to the teacher of an effective voice in administration. Increasing the power of teachers was also sought through tenure and protection of the civil rights of the teacher. Also included in the goals were the bread and butter issues of increased salaries and a pension fund.[19]

The tension between trade unionism and social reconstructionist arguments in the American Federation of Teachers were heightened in the 1920's when the Brookwood Labor College and the Manumit School were organized into union locals and A.J. Muste, the Chairman and Vice President of Brookwood and Chairman of Manumit, became Vice President of the American Federation of Teachers. During this period the American Federation of Teachers gave recognition to workers' education and, of course, to the development of an alternative system of education. In

fact, the Chicago Women High School Teachers' Local for a number of years interviewed prospective Brookwood students living in the Chicago area. The Chicago local also established a full Brookwood scholarship which was awarded each year to a trade unionist living within Illinois.[20]

A.J. Muste felt that a strong relationship needed to be maintained between the workers' education movement and the teachers' movement. He wrote in 1925 as Vice President of the American Federation of Teachers that, "The workers' education movement is in itself in some sense a challenge to the public school system. Workers' education has sprung up in America...because educational needs existed among the industrial population which were not being met by established agencies."[21] This relationship to the workers' education movement did not mean a complete rejection of the public schools for an alternative system but the use of workers' education to bring about change in the public schools. At a conference on workers' education held at Brookwood in 1925 Abraham Lefkowitz of the New York Local of the American Federation of Teachers painted a gloomy picture of the failure of the public schools. In the discussion with A.J. Muste and other leaders of workers' education which followed the paper, Lefkowitz complained, "Education for a new social order can be done only to a slight degree in the public schools. The administrational educational outlook will not permit." He went on to state that the only hope was for labor to gain control of school boards. The options of establishing a complete system of alternative schools was not available because of the expense. Lefkowitz told the group, "we can't take on so big a thing as the New York City budget of one hundred million dollars, but we can support Manumit, and we can push,

as our committee is doing, for the influence of teachers on the curriculum."[22]

A.J. Muste supported the craft aims of the teachers' union at the same time hoping that it would become a tool for social reconstruction. Out of his fears was that the leadership of the American Federation of Labor would influence more in the direction of conservative trade unionism. In 1929, while Muste was feeling the attack upon Brookwood by President Green, he warned that, "The A.F. of L. works with the company union known as the National Education Association...We must fight not only the A.F. of L. but also the A.F. of L. psychology toward teachers."[23]

The tension that existed between Brookwood and the leadership of the American Federation of Labor highlighted one of the continuous problems facing organized labor and teachers' unions in the United States. Union leaders often felt that acceptance by society depended on appearing respectable and anti-radical. The actions of President Green certainly supported this argument. This appearance of conservatism was reinforced by a system of collective bargaining which made the worker dependent upon the continued existence of the present form of industrial organization.

This same problem has occured with teachers' unions. They have appeared respectable after purging their ranks of radicals during the cold war[24] and have wedded themselves to the present structure of schooling. Any threat to that structure is a threat to their power of collective bargaining. Attempts to democratize the schools during the last fewyears have encountered substantial resistance from teachers' unions. Decentralization, the creation of greater community control over education, voucher systems, educational credit cards and power equalization formulas have not received significant support from the teachers' unions. It is almost

a weekly experience to pick up the Sunday New York Times and find Albert Shanker attacking in tones that are often anti-intellectual of any proposals of this nature. In fact, Shanker has reached a point of viewing any criticism of the public schools as part of a conspiracy to destroy teachers' unions. In October of 1973 Shanker wrote in a very revealing column in the New York Times that, "The critics of teachers and schools--supported by a peculiar alliance of liberal academics, giant foundations, profit-minded businessmen, and conservative public officials--propose an endless array of cure-all gimmicks that would, at the very least, strip teachers of their new and hard-won gains and, at the extreme, dismantle the public schools altogether."[25]

This conservatism was, of course, implicit in the trade union philosophy that was part of labor's formulation of a policy toward public schooling during the early part of the twentieth century. But what is different today in teachers' unions is not only the tendency to abandon social reconstructionist objectives and the unwillingness to explore and support a break up of the public school monopoly over education like the attempts at Brookwood and Manumit, but also an apparent abandonment of the use of teachers' unions as a mechanism for countering conservative ideology in the public schools. For instance, in the recent national designs for a middle school and high school issued under the label of COMPAS by the American Federation of Teachers there is a complete lack of any statement about the social purposes of schooling and the type of political and economic content that should go into the subjects taught in those schools. The structures proposed by COMPAS incorporate many of current trends in education without evaluating them in terms of union philosophy and goals. After reading the COMPAS designs,

one could come to the conclusion that they could have just as easily been written by the National Education Association as by the American Federation of Teachers.[26] In fact, nothing can reflect more the hollowness of the current economic and social philosophy of the American Federation of Teachers than the current merger talks with the National Education Association. This merger might not only create one of the most powerful and conservative forces in education but it also might signal the final end to the organizational objective of teachers' unions of providing a voice for the laboring class in the formulation of education policy.

FOOTNOTES

1. See Gerald N. Grob, Workers and Utopia: A Study of Ideological Conflict in the American Labor Movement 1865-1900 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1961).

2. See Joel Spring, Education and the Rise of the Corporate State Boston: Beacon Press, 1972); Marvin Lazerson, The Origins of the Urban School (Cambridge: The Harvard University Press, 1972) Lawrence Cremin, The Transformation of the School (New York: Random House, 1961).

3. See Philip R.V. Curoe, Educational Attitudes and Policies of Organized Labor in the United States (New York: Teachers College, 1926) pp. 66-101

4. James H. Maurer, "Labor's Demand for Its Own Schools," Nation (September 20, 1922), Vol. 115, No. 2985, pp. 276-278.

5. "Report of Committee on Education," Report of Proceedings of the American Federation of Labor 1921, p. 326.

6. "Report of Committee on Education," Report of Proceedings of the American Federation of Labor 1922, pp. 65-66.

7. "Report of Executive Committee," Report of Proceedings of the American Federation of Labor 1915, pp. 159-162.

8. "The Civil Service Humbug," Journal of the Knights of Labor (September, 1903), p. 4.

9. "Education," Report of the Proceedings of the American Federation of Labor 1925, p. 74.

10. "Educational Policies," Report of Proceedings of the American Federation Federation of Labor 1925, pp. 362-365.

11. "Committee on Education," Report of the Proceedings of the American Federation of Labor 1930, p. 99.

12. Bulletin and Announcement of Courses, Brookwood Labor College, 1929-1930 p. 3.

13. Devere Allen, "A School for Workers' Children," The Nation (October 15, 1924), Vol. 119, No. 3093, pp. 417-418.

14. William Green, "Education and Industrial Peace," Workers' Education (May, 1925), Vol. III, No. 1, pp. 4-9.

15. Still More About Brookwood College (Katonah, New York, 1929)

16. See De Coux

17. "Resolution," Report of Proceedings of the American Federation of Labor 1914, p. 335.

18. "Resolution No. 132" Report of Proceedings of the American Federation of Labor 1916, p. 358-359.

19. Ibid., pp. 358-359.

20. A.J. Muste, "The Teachers' Union and Workers' Education," Worker's Education," Workers' Education (August, 1925), Vol. III, No. 2, p. 14.

21. Ibid., p. 15.

22. A. Lefkowitz, "The Public Schools as a Factor in Mass Education," Second Annual Conference of Teachers in Workers' Education (Brookwood, Feb. 20-22, 1925), pp. 19-27.

23. Workers' Education at the Cross Roads, Sixth Annual Conference of Teachers in Workers Education (Brookwood, Feb. 22-24, 1929), p. 43.

24. See Paul Violas, "Academic Freedom and the Public School Teacher, 1930-1960" Roots of Crisis by Karier, Violas and Spring (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1973), pp. 163-196.

25. Albert Shanker, "Teacher Unionism: A Quiet Revolution..." New York Times, (October 28, 1973), Section E, p. 9.

26. National Council for a Comprehensive Program for American Schools, A National Design for the High School, A National Design for the Middle School (Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, 1973).